

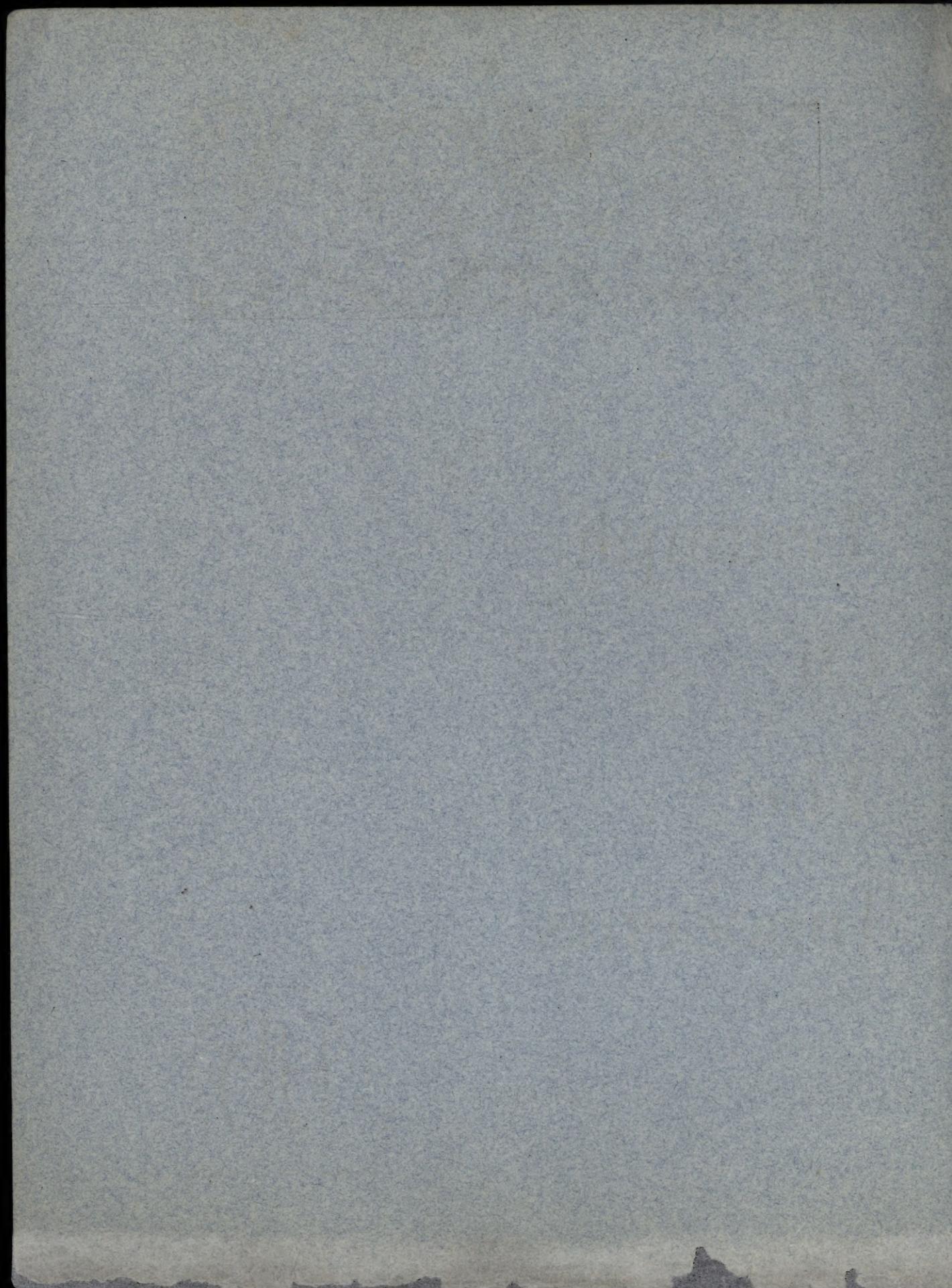


The
Triumph
Of
The
Innocents

LONDON

1885







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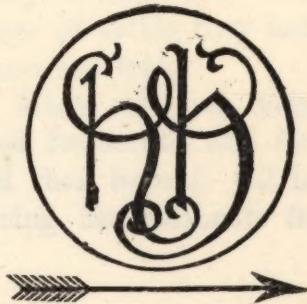
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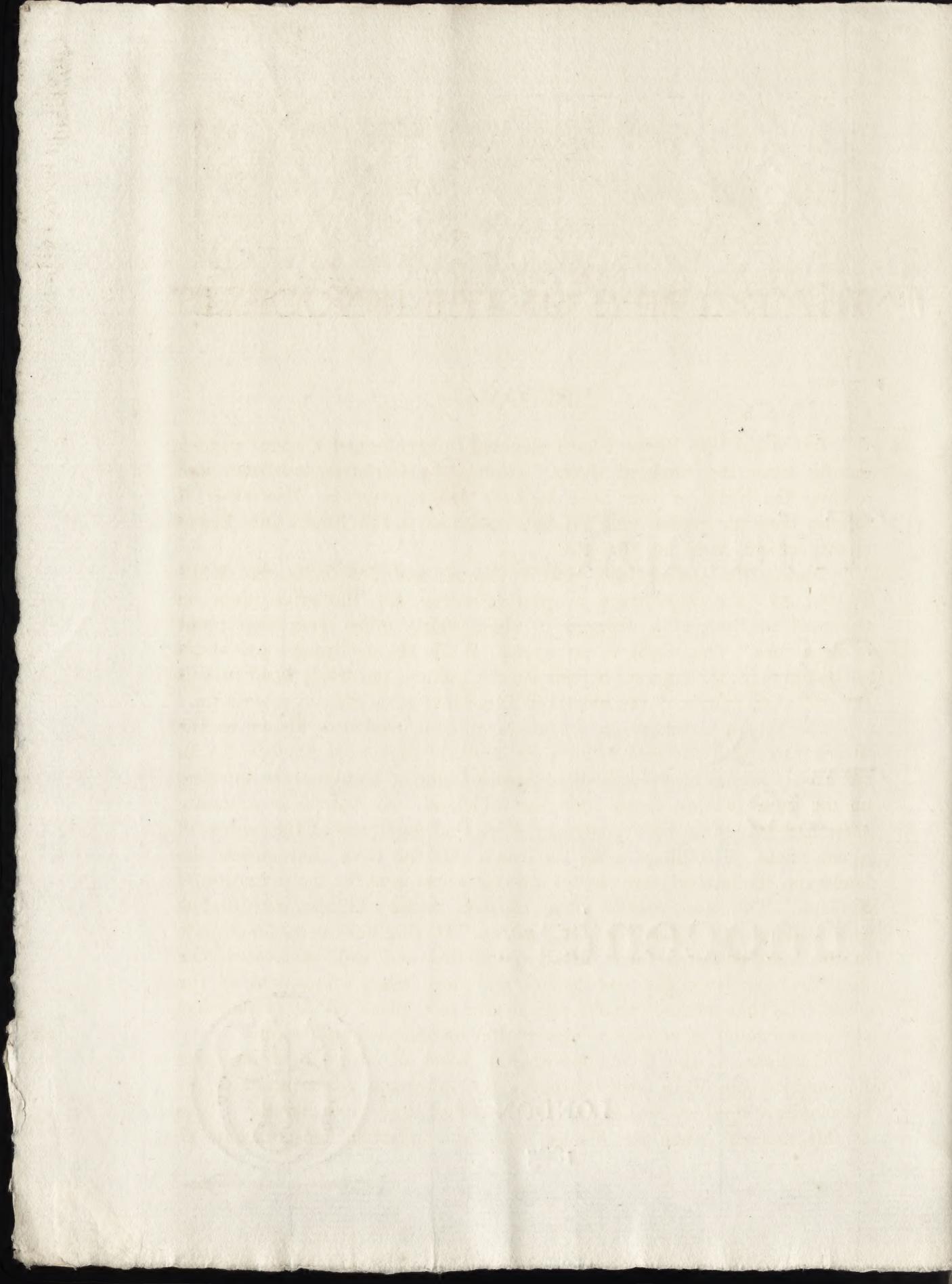
HeInan Hunt

The Triumph Of The Innocents

LONDON

1885





THE TRIUMPH OF THE INNOCENTS

EPITOME

THE flight into Egypt I have assumed to have occurred about sixteen months after the birth of Jesus. Guided by Christian tradition, and holding the birth of our Lord to have taken place in December, it follows that the period which I have assigned to the Flight into Egypt is the second April in His life.

During the spring-time, rich in flowers and first-fruits, the HOLY TRAVELLERS are represented as passing across the Philistine plain on the road to Gaza at a distance of about thirty miles from their point of departure. The night is far spent. While the declining moon sheds its last rays on the natural objects in the picture, unearthly light reveals the embodied spirits of the martyred Innocents advancing in procession.

The Virgin is seated on a she-ass of the breed now known as the Mecca race, and the foal follows its mother, as is seen to this day in the East. Signal fires—still lit in Syria in time of trouble—are burning on the slope looking down from the tableland. St. Joseph is watching these fires intent on discovering any signs that may present themselves of a movement of soldiery upon the road. Of the trees that enrich the landscape, the nearest ones shelter a water-wheel used for the irrigation of the land. The more remote group clusters round a village, with its few huts visible by the lights that burn within. Having left the colder climate of the high country, then thickly populated and well cultivated, the fugitives have descended into the rich and more balmy atmosphere of the plain. As they advance nearer and nearer to a place of safety they feel the blessed relief of a sense of peace after disturbance and terror.

Conscious of the divine mercy, the heart of Mary rejoicing over her rescued son, feels compassion for the murdered Innocents, and for the childless mothers less happy and less honoured than herself. It is at this moment when the Virgin has been replacing the garments in

which the infant had been hurriedly wrapped at the time of the escape from Bethlehem, that Jesus recognises the spirits of the slain Innocents, His little neighbours of Bethlehem, children like Himself. They reveal the signs of their martyrdom. Garlanded for the sacrifice, bearing branches and blossoms of trees, they progressively mark their understanding of the glory of their service. An infant spirit isolated in wonder finds no mark of harm, where the sword wounded him, permitted to appear on his glorified body. Behind in the air are the babes as yet hardly awakened to the new life. In differing revelations of sorrow they show the influence of earthly terror and suffering still impressed upon them. Towards the front are other spirits of children triumphing in completer knowledge of their service. One of them in priestly office leads the band. Those who follow cast down their tokens of martyrdom in the path of their recognised Lord. Others encircle the travel-worn foal, wearily following its mother, and so bring it up to the onward group. The shallow stream over which the procession passes, reflecting the quiet beauty of the night sky, is unruffled except by the steps of Joseph. The flood upon which the spiritual children advance forms a contrast to this, by being in motion, The living fountains of water—the streams of eternal life—furnish this, mystically portrayed as ever rolling onward. Instead of being dissipated in natural vapour, the play of its wavelets takes the form of airy globes which image the Jewish belief in the millennium that is to follow the advent of the Messiah.

DESCRIPTION IN DETAIL.

"Behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."

THE Flight into Egypt is generally believed in the West to have occurred a few days after the birth of our Lord. The Eastern Churches on the other hand extend the interval which is supposed to have elapsed to a period of nearly two years.

The considerations which influenced the choice of age for the Saviour in the picture are therefore not simply artistic. The view of the Eastern Churches can scarcely be rejected with reasonable regard to the circumstances of the visit of the Magi, and of the terms of Herod's fiat for the murder of the male children of two years old and under, "according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men." In the Gospel of St. Luke, however, it is said that after the Purification in the Temple, which was forty days after the birth, St. Joseph and the Holy Virgin returned to Nazareth with the Child, and that there, speaking in general terms after the accomplished fact, Jesus grew up. An apparent discrepancy is thus pointed out by some critics, but it is one such as often presents itself in all honest evidence of facts; and the report in St. Matthew simply requires it to be understood that the Holy Family came back again to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Indeed, the residence in the latter city does not seem to have been chosen as a permanent one, for, on the

return from Egypt, it was only accepted because safety was still not so certain in the dominion of Archelaus. The motive which had operated in bringing St. Joseph and the Virgin to Bethlehem from the north, before the birth of our Lord, is generally understood to be the securing of claim, under the enrolment of Quirinius, to the genealogy, and perhaps to some share of family inheritance. This would operate more powerfully after the birth of Jesus in influencing the parents to make the city of David their permanent home. There is therefore no contradiction between the two Gospels, but the comparison of the evidence given by the two Evangelists in my mind strongly establishes the view of the Eastern Churches, that the Saviour's birth took place more than one year earlier than the flight. Herod's estimate of the age of Him who was born King of the Jews was not made without careful calculation of the date from the birth, so as fully to include the Child whom he had determined to destroy, that he might thus, like the typical politician of the great reader of human nature,

“Circumvent God,”

and it follows accordingly that Jesus was not fully two years of age.

Whatever reserve of feeling there may be towards a reading which conveys a disputable view of a fact in Holy Writ, let it be remembered that an artist treating a subject in which such is offered cannot delay to make his choice. The first part of his study in making his design is to form a theory in harmony with the intention of the records illustrated, as read by the fullest light, and to leave an exploded theory with confidence that his rendering will be approved as either correct or unobjectionable. In this case no special pleading is needed, seeing that St. Augustine puts the Massacre of the Innocents in connection with the Passover. Perhaps he regarded it as an antithesis to the slaying of the first-born in Egypt, and understood the quotation by St. Matthew from Hosea, “Out of Egypt have I called my son,” as having a fuller purpose than at first appears. In any case he regarded the festival as not fixing the date of the massacre, and the fact argues that neither the date given in the Western Church for the commemoration, nor in the Greek Church, is understood as the date of the sacrifice of the first Christian Martyrs.

The journey has been across the mountains from Bethlehem towards Gaza. The birth-place of Christ is on the further side of the range, about five miles beyond the highest elevation, somewhat to the right of the point

where the star is rising above the distant curve of the hill ; the nearer mountains are about 1,500 feet in height. These, with intervening valleys, are further on in the highlands overtopped by rolling waves of the limestone rocks until they reach the watershed of the country, which is about 2,400 feet in height. Bethlehem lies beyond this 500 feet lower, on a spur overlooking the eastern country, thus falling gradually to the plain of the Dead Sea.

The ass is of the Mecca race—so called from the fact that they are brought from the Arab city of pilgrimage as descendants from one which Mohammed rode. They were necessarily always costly, being much sought for on account of their power of endurance, and their surefootedness. It is quite within licence to assume that St. Joseph may have provided himself with such an animal for his journeys. The route taken has been by bye-paths across the mountains and fields to the plain with beaten tracks from all other cities to Gaza, which, once passed, will put the fugitives in safety.

In eluding Herod's cruel decree, St. Joseph would have made his route as far from the state highway as possible. The distance still to be traversed is about ten miles. The Flight into Egypt is one of the first events in the life of Christ which marked the power of the Prince of this world, whom Jesus Christ had come to combat and to conquer, by innocence and suffering.

In Bethlehem the Holy Family, as is still the custom, had lain down soon after dusk, and doubtless the intimation by dream was given while the protection of night still offered the longest opportunity of escape. It was a voice ringing out its warning after the dreamer had started up in the darkness, "Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt." The Rabbinical writers speak of the time anterior to the day of the expected Messiah as destitute of marvels and miracles, these having ceased since the death of Simon the Just—a period of nearly two hundred years—and about this date an age of spiritual activity is witnessed to by them. Wonders in the heavens and on the earth occur, although not of the stupendous kind that had been expected, and which later the Doctors demanded of Christ. Dreams of Divine inspiration are mentioned out of the Gospels as frequently affecting the fate of men. St. Joseph had a spirit of profound obedience to heavenly authority. The Founder of Islamism declared that among all the ancient prophets none was greater than Jonah. To me it seems that among the saints in the group which fostered the Christian Church during its first perils, none

was greater than Joseph, and this for an opposite reason. He had the very soul of submission and faith, bearing all evil report and contumely without resentment when once he had been assured that the Heavenly Father's purpose needed this. It seems to us no confession of weakness in this claim for the first of the Fathers of Christianity to state here that St. Joseph was last of all the band of guardians of the infant Church, recognised in its established days as a saint. It is a further proof of his humility, and of that true trust in right doing which leaves all after-issues to God, when his command sanctifies a course. "Pray that your flight be not on the Sabbath, nor in the winter," may have been said with some family memory of the troubles suffered on the escape from Herod's cunning. In April short storms of severity occur; the writer has seen on the eighth day of this month snow three inches deep which had fallen during the night. The picture gives snow on the heights, and to be consistent the beginning of their journey would have been under a cloud-covered sky. Dark and forbidding would have been the scene as the travellers emerged from the town (walled, in part at least, since remains of such are still traceable near the tomb of the mother of Benoni) the wind blustering through the exposed valleys and scouring over the heights, the anger of heaven and earth alike dictating stealth and silencing all converse.

In succeeding generations fancy decorated the story with many legends, but although these are often innocent, and even poetic beyond the ordinary mark of the apocryphal Gospel narratives, they are all avoided in this conception. Here no legend is taken for authority. The attempt is to put together the detached links of the story, and I rely only upon my personal knowledge of the country and climate, acquired by many years of residence throughout all its seasons, to understand how the sorrows of that night would be intensified by the angry elements.

The looking back upon a home from which a family is driven by oppression has ever been regarded as a motive for compassion, and to this calamity the Holy Family had to submit. The heights to the south of "Beit Jala"—by some writers recognised as Rama—give an extended view, the mountains of Moab far away to the east, and the Dead Sea below, the great plain of Philistia down in the west. A storm thence seen produces the impression of sublime purpose. The lightning gathers beyond the great hollow which includes Jericho and the lost Sodom and Gomorrah, and then wavers, as the fingers of a mighty player upon the keys of a musical instrument, collecting the errant forces of the air, and

tremulous with dancing flame in the south over the extending table-land it seems to linger as though searching the plain of Philistia for its special mark, and there darts down in fury ; but the sword which was to pierce the breast of the mother, "blessed withal above all women," was of man's forging. According to our order of events the noisy elements would not have endured long, for soon the peaceful snow followed falling with its wandering flakes. It would be then that the cry would sound, which St. Matthew quotes Jeremiah to describe, "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted because they are not." We are not debarred from thinking that the mother suffered some of her pain in the wonder natural to humanity, that the powers of evil should be able thus to prevail over the pure and the righteous.

It is natural to follow the mind of the mother in such distraction of love, while the wintry mountains are traversed, and the fugitives descend into the rich plain with its genial breath, the more placid from the cleared sky. We can understand the comfort that would be prayed for—a higher knowledge of the Divine mercy—and we can conceive how this came to her through her pure maternal charity, in the form of ever increasing tender regard for the woes of the children torn from their mothers' breasts for ever, and of the bereaved childless women mourning their dearest ones. She searches her much harassed mind to find consolation for the weeping neighbours of her home. The party pass through the rich corn-fields, among villages of peaceful slumberers. The whole air is balmy and soothing. They feel the comfort of peace after a storm. The torrents would no longer be in broken cascades but flowing along in deep channels to the sea, the further from the uplands the greater the change in the temperature. Recently the travellers have made a turn in their course to find a crossing sure to be provided in Roman days over the deep river which has to be crossed in the path to a village on the road. The garments which the Mother is about to arrange have been carried with other needful gear in the saddle-bags. Her own under-garment is the wedding-dress of Bethlehem, worn by a bride until it is past service. While her Child is being re-dressed, and is thus engaging her solicitude, He calls her attention to the holy company around them. The spirits of the children of Bethlehem troop along by the side, they bear the signs of their martyrdom. Garlanded as were ancient sacrifices and bearing branches of blossoming trees ; like enrolled saints they appear "in habit" as they lived, the forward ones already rejoice in the knowledge of their

high service. Midway there is an infant bewildered to find that his new spiritual body bears no trace of the fatal wound. Behind in the air are babes; this sleeping, grieving group is the only one in the picture which in its sorrowing aspect connects the idea of human pain with the fate suffered, for the rest, in degrees differing, death is already seen to have no sting, the grave no victory.

The foal accompanies the mother ass, in a long journey the young creature lags behind whinnying in remonstrance at the ceaseless steps, and only hurrying on in bounds when there is fear of the parent ass getting beyond reach and sight. The glorified infants are encircling the weary laggard, who is thus brought up to the onward group. The wild dogs which have come out of the mill-house to bark—as is their wont with nocturnal travellers striving to pass a homestead in silence—are cowed at the unusual apparition and steal away in fear. The leader and father of the party, St. Joseph, regards not the ghostly attendants. He is engaged in securing the best means of safety while passing the near village. He watches the distant fires to discover any signs there might be of pursuit. He is passing over the shallow stream supplied for irrigation by the creaking water-wheel. The liquid surface is

“Pavid with the image of the sky,”

and burdened lightly with the fallen flower from the hand of one of the foremost seraphic children. In contrast to this mundane reflection of Heaven—which takes the leader’s steps for the moment—are the waves on which the children dance along. They are not clouds such as angels may be portrayed upon. They are from the fountain of the water of life, given to them that are athirst freely (athirst for fuller life). It is the spiritual eternal stream provided in exchange for the life that perisheth which has been to them so brief. These first Christian martyrs no longer walk on the earth, but they travel on the living waters of life, bringing comfort to their late fellows and to all future disciples who have yet their burdens to bear and their victory to win. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth.”

The stream is portrayed as ever rolling onward and breaking—where it might if real water be dissipated in vapour—into magnified globes which image the thoughts rife in that age in the minds of pious

Jews, particularly of those in great tribulation, of the millennium which was to be the mature outcome of the advent of the Messiah. The promises to the Patriarchs are progressive as is all the teaching of Revelation. The dream at Bethel first clearly speaks of the union of Earth and Heaven. This was the dawn of the exaltation of the Jewish faith, and accordingly the large orb reflects dimly the Patriarch asleep with a twofold ladder or pathway up and down, which is traversed by the servants of God. The intention is to combine with the first beautiful dream of the Patriarch other ideas of Messiah's reign which harmonise with this, and which were developed later. Heaven is indicated by the adoration by the elders of the spotless Lamb, and the brokenheartedness of those who turn towards Heaven is illustrated by the fallen penitent, by the burden-bearing of the faithful pilgrim, and the leading of the lion by the young child, while the tree of life in the midst bears the fruit for the healing of the nations.

So far it has been recognised that for the guidance of spectators who have no unlimited time to work out for themselves the intention of the picture, an explanation of my purpose was necessary. I however remember with gratification that when the picture was yet incomplete, the main intention of the design was apprehended by some of the few visitors to my studio, and that Professor Ruskin on seeing it, while the principal group was then only crudely expressed, in the impulse of generous appreciation, alluded to the purpose of the children in the picture in words of such correctness as well as exquisite expression and measure that, had they described the complete design, the painter might well have dreaded to provide any other. Shortly afterwards I had to abandon the first painting from defects in the canvas on which it was painted, after excessive loss of time and repeated disappointments which then nearly disposed me to give up the subject and turn to some other. Without the spontaneous appreciation of our great writer on art, to whose championship in the early days of prerafaelitism I owe so much, I should scarcely have persevered to save the work of so many alternating feelings of joy and pain. The Art Professor now kindly permits me to quote from his *Lectures on the Art of England*:

“For all human loss and pain, there is no comfort, no interpretation worth a thought, except only in the doctrine of the Resurrection; of which doctrine, remember, it is an immutable historical fact that all the beautiful work, and all the happy existence of mankind, hitherto, has depended on, or consisted in, the hope of it.

“The picture of which I came to-day chiefly to speak, as a symbol of that doctrine, was incomplete when I saw it, and is so still; but enough was done to constitute it the most important work of Hunt’s life, as yet; and if health is granted to him for its completion, it will, both in reality and in esteem, be the greatest religious painting of our time.

“You know that in the most beautiful former conceptions of the Flight into Egypt, the Holy Family were always represented as watched over, and ministered to, by attendant angels. But only the safety and peace of the Divine Child and its mother are thought of. No sadness or wonder of meditation returns to the desolate homes of Bethlehem.

“But in this English picture all the story of the escape, as of the flight, is told, in fulness of peace, and yet of compassion. The travel is in the dead of the night, the way unseen and unknown;—but, partly stooping from the starlight, and partly floating on the desert mirage, move, with the Holy Family, the glorified souls of the Innocents. Clear in celestial light, and gathered into child-garlands of gladness, they look to the Child in whom they live, and yet, for them to die. Waters of the River of Life flow before on the sands: the Christ stretches out His arms to the nearest of them;—leaning from His mother’s breast.

“To how many bereaved households may not this happy vision of conquered death bring in the future, days of peace.

“I do not care to speak of other virtues in this design than those of its majestic thought,—but you may well imagine for yourselves how the painter’s quite separate and, in its skill, better than magical, power of giving effects of intense light, has aided the effort of his imagination, while the passion of his subject has developed in him a swift grace of invention which for my own part I never recognised in his design till now. I can say with deliberation that none even of the most animated groups and processions of children which constitute the loveliest sculpture of the Robbias and Donatello, can more than rival the freedom and felicity of motion, or the subtlety of harmonious line, in the happy wreath of these angel-children.

“Of this picture I came to-day chiefly to speak, nor will I disturb the poor impression which my words can give you of it by any immediate reference to other pictures by our leading masters.”

A brief explanation of the history of the production of this picture is called for both as an apology for the long interval since last I exhibited a large picture, and also of the fact that the painting now shown is a repetition of my first attempt to illustrate this imaginative episode in

“The Flight into Egypt,” which before long, will also be exhibited, cured of its defect. I may be allowed, perhaps, to state that first in the year 1854, I acted upon a resolution formed earlier to go to Palestine. This was to revivify on canvas, if it were possible to me, the facts of Scripture History, by study not made in sketches to be incorporated in subject pictures afterwards in England. My aim was rather to advance nearer to the truth than had yet been done, by patiently working out a whole picture, surrounded by the very people and the circumstances of the life in Judea of old days. To strive—while not forgetting the vital ambition of an artist, which is to serve as high priest and expounder of the excellence of the works of the Creator—choosing the highest types and combinations of His handiworks, as the Greeks taught the after-world to do, so that men’s admiration may be fascinated by the perfections of the works of the Great Author of all, and men’s life thus may be a continual joy and solace, and at the same time to embody the events by which God in His providence led the foremost of the people Israel to be prepared to act as teachers and prophets to the whole Gentile world. I did not—let me say—wish to condemn any artistic manly treatment of similar subjects by others. My idea suggested the experiment to me as worth making for myself. The attempt was beset with difficulties beyond expectation, and being away for long, put me at many disadvantages in my profession, but I have many reasons for rejoicing at the course taken, and I have now to gratefully acknowledge the recognition of the public who, from the time of the exhibition of the first result of my Eastern labours—“The Scapegoat,” have ever given exceptional attention to my paintings, produced only, I regret to say, at long intervals, owing to circumstances external to the limits of this statement.

In 1875 I returned to Jerusalem after an absence of two years. I had taken the care usual with experienced travellers to have all my luggage studiously packed and directed before leaving England. It was, however, an omission of mine, which seemed a trivial one at the time, not to see them delivered into the hands of the agent for the carriers to Jaffa. On my arrival in Syria the cases containing all my precious materials for my work had not arrived. Every effort possible was made to obtain information of my missing boxes, and I delayed for months to commence my picture. The excitement during this period, fanned by fanatical Moslems, grew very fierce. The miseries caused by the conscription for the Russian war, and still more those caused by the rapacity of governors who found the opportunity a good one for increasing their dishonest

exactions, drove the poor fellahs well nigh mad with ferocity, and it was easy then, as it was in Alexandria, and as it will ever be under similar circumstances, to make the poor people believe that all such miseries are sent by Heaven as a curse on them for not extirpating the enemies of Islamism. We lived always in doubt as to what a day might bring forth. Had the people been less dangerous I would have left my family for two weeks or so, and purchased canvas in Naples or Rome. As it was I dared not leave them. When first the uncertainty about my materials seemed serious and altogether inscrutable, I felt forced to purchase the best piece of linen to be found in Jerusalem. This I prepared with the tempera ground, which before had proved to be perfect. When this was ready, however, I still lingered over my preliminary work, in hope that the proper canvas would arrive; but months further went by mocking my hopes, and eventually I had to undertake my deferred labours upon the sheeting which the fortune of the day had compelled me to choose.

It was a chapter of accidents bearing pain and long long trial to me. The earliest part of my work was the sketching in of the whole composition and the painting of the background. No test of the suitability of my surface could have been more satisfactory as far as was needed for the point reached. I almost dismissed anxiety about the final results, and I had advanced considerably with my work before the missing boxes arrived. It seemed a great and needless waste to recommence my labours when so much apparently had been done. It would have been well for me, however, had I thrown all my work aside, and begun again, and this indeed it would have been even years later, for from the moment when I suspected with what fatal consequences my first start had been beset, until the moment, when in England, at the end of 1882, I gave up the picture, I always had reason to persuade myself that a little more patience—perhaps even the perseverance further of two more weeks—might overcome the difficulty intervening between the stage arrived at and the entire completion of the picture. I will not weary the reader with a statement of all the vexatious incidents of my trouble, but it is only a needful excuse for me to state that a studio built specially for me by German instead of Arab builders, let in the rain as though the roof had been made of open wire, and that when this worry had passed, I was under summons to come back to London by a certain date, and this made the difficulty greater of deliberately estimating the amount of danger which I incurred in advancing my work on the imperfect surface.

When I opened the picture in London and placed it in a fair light I could not fail to see how much precious time had been wasted from the fact that all my drawing and modelling and colour indeed was marred by irregularity of the plane on which they were given. I called in an expert to help me in the course to be followed, and he, as it happened, urged me still to trust to the means already used to overcome the evil, expressing the opinion that it was then nearly at an end. Alas! this proved to be far from the case, although I called in the best judgment to guide me at intervals, and I confided the work for relining on the strongest sailcloth canvas to the hands of one of the most skilful of restorers. Every revived hope ended in disappointment, until I having persevered with it for seven years and a half, finally abandoned it, and commenced on the new painting on January 1st, 1883. Since then, when away for my health, the reliner again had the old picture to treat on a plan of a radical character agreed upon between us. It was to cut out the central part of the sheeting containing the group of the Virgin and Child, to lift up the surrounding cloth, to fray out its edges, to insert a piece larger by an inch than the opening, with margins also frayed in the opposite direction, and to place the whole already relined picture upon another sailcloth. Unlimited time was given for this experiment, and I am happy to say that now the picture is thoroughly sound, and that it will soon be ready. The present exhibited painting is about four inches broader and two inches higher than the Jerusalem picture: it is also changed in several points, some of which modifications I have since adopted as improvement for the old picture: other additions, however, are only in the present painting.

W. HOLMAN HUNT.

DRAYCOTT LODGE, FULHAM,
February 23, 1885.

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The
Triumph of the Innocents

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